

“MAN IS THE MASTER OF EVERYTHING AND DECIDES EVERYTHING”: DE-CONSTRUCTING THE NORTH KOREAN *JUCHE* AXIOM

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Abstract

This essay undertakes a critical de-construction of the core axiomatic principle of the North Korean *Juche* ideology: “Man is the master of everything and decides everything.” The author examines the axiom as an epistemic construction that structures human perception of objective reality, identifying fundamental philosophical problems in its binary opposition of “man” and “everything.” Despite official North Korean claims that *Juche* is an “original revolutionary philosophy” and a “man-centered philosophy,” critical analysis reveals that the axiom is nonsensical, that it has no genuine or real philosophical content, and that the *Juche* ideology is neither humanist nor materialist nor rationalist.

Introduction

The North Korean conception of *Juche* was first articulated as a political slogan by the late Kim Il Sung in 1955 in face of the unfolding “de-Stalinization” campaign in the post-Stalin Soviet Union. Developed into an ideology of self-reliance in the 1960s during the Sino-Soviet split and Chinese Cultural Revolution, *Juche* was eventually inaugurated in the revised North Korean constitution of 1972 as a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism to our country’s reality” (*Socialist Constitution* 1972, 2). During the 1980s, the doctrine was transformed further into a purported philosophical worldview under Kim Il Sung’s son and heir, Kim Jong Il. When the Stalinist Soviet Union, the historical liberator and greatest economic benefactor of the North Korean regime, collapsed in 1991, *Juche* finally displaced all references to Marxism-Leninism in the 1992 revised constitution. Notwithstanding that Kim Il Sung had said in 1972 that *Juche* was not an original idea and even spoke of the “Marxist-Leninist *Juche* idea” (Kim 1972b, 1; 1979, 1), Kim Jong Il declared in 1974 that the “*Juche* philosophy is a new philosophy created by the leader” and that the Marxist classics “did not give a full account of the essential features of man as dominator and transformer of nature and society” (Kim 1974). He added in 1976 that *Juche* was “an idea newly discovered in the history of human thought” that could not be correctly explained from the point of view of Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism (Kim 1976). Kim would later assert in 1996 that *Juche* was an “original revolutionary philosophy” that superseded the limitations, immaturities, and failures of dialectical materialism (Kim 1996, 3, 4, 6). Despite the alternations and modifications *Juche* has undergone since the 1950s, it has retained a more or less constant axiom from when it was formally adopted in the 1970s, “Man is the

master of everything and decides everything,” an ostensible appropriation from Maoism that North Korean sources present as the essence of the *Juche* ideology and an innovation in philosophy. Under critical analysis, however, the anthropocentric *Juche* axiom turns out to be non-philosophical and in fact nonsensical, being neither humanist nor materialist nor rationalist in conceptual substance.[1]

Logos Personified in Anthropos

First, clarification of the phrase “*Juche* idea” (*juche sasang*), the official translation of the state ideology, is needed. Partial Korean-English translation, needless to say, obfuscates and mystifies the concept, which is more readily understood as follows: *Juche sasang* = subject ideology = subject-ism = subjectivism. As a doctrine of subjectivism, *Juche* is a form of philosophical idealism, namely, subjective idealism. Before becoming a state ideology and alleged philosophy, *Juche* first signified programmatic attention to the “Korean revolution,” not “any other country’s revolution,” as the “subject” of party propaganda and agitational work (Kim 1972a, 19). Kim Il Sung’s initial use of the slogan in his 1955 *Juche* speech prioritized North Korean national interests a propos of the Stalinist policy of *socialism in one country* on North Korean terms, and that has remained a characteristic feature of *Juche* ever since. North Korea has, as a logical outcome of Stalinism, now adopted the equivalent of Nikita Khrushchev’s policy of “peaceful coexistence with capitalism” (Korean News Service 2005). If *Juche sasang* literally means subjectivism, the nationalism inherent in its political orientation makes *national subjectivism* the more accurate translation of the Korean phrase. Not surprisingly, the orthodox nationalist Stalinism of *Juche* is invested with ethnic-racial nationalism, Kim himself having stressed the need for ethnic-racial pride (*minjokjök jabushim*) in his 1955 speech.[2] The more explicit and unadulterated form of this nationalism and populism is seen, for example, in his successor Kim Jong Il’s 1997 speech “On Preserving the *Juche* Character and National Character of the Revolution and Construction,” which says, “Those who have the *blood and soul of the Korean nation* must link their own destiny with the destiny of the country and nation [. . .] *no matter which class and strata they belong to* and which social system they live in and whether they live at home or abroad” (Kim 1997; emphasis added). Having turned to military dictatorship under the Korean People’s Army during the Great Famine of 1996 to 1999, the North Korea regime also advances the military-first ideology (*sŏn’gun sasang*), which rejects the working class with the slogans “precedence of the army over the working class” (Kim 2007); “the rifle stands above the hammer and sickle”; and “the army is the party,” “the army is the state,” and “the army is the people” (Kim 2002).

Being an abstract categorical proposition, the national subjectivist *Juche* axiom poses several problems as a sentence, that is, as an epistemic construction that structures human perception of objective reality. These problems are seen in its binary opposition structure and mediating relations. The axiom “Man is the master of everything and decides everything” (“Saram i modŭn kosŭi chuin imyŏn modŭn kŏsul kyŏlchŏnghanda”) illustrates a subject-object binary opposition of “man” (*saram*) and “everything” (*modŭn kŏt*).[3] Here, the opposition of “man” to “everything” is mediated or linked through the

capacity of man to be the conscious “master” (*chuin*) who “decides” (*kyŏlchŏnghanda*) everything. That is more clearly seen in a diagrammatic representation:

Subjectivity	Mediation	Objectivity
Man (<i>saram</i>) ⇒	Master (<i>chuin</i>) Decides (<i>kyŏlchŏnghanda</i>)	⇒ Everything (<i>modŭn kŏt</i>)

Fig. 1. Subject-object binary opposition and mediation in *Juche* ideology.

The subject-centeredness or man-centeredness of the axiom raises a number of philosophical questions: (1) What is man? (2) What is a master? (3) What is decision? (4) What is everything? (5) How can man master everything? (6) How can man decide everything? (7) What objective and subjective factors constrain man, mastery, and decision-making? These philosophical questions flow into a set of sociological questions: (1) Who is this man? (2) What is his stage of historical development? (3) What is his geographic environment? (4) What is the state of his social productive forces? (5) What form of socioeconomic organization does he live under? (6) What social class does he belong to? (7) What is his level of political consciousness? Evidently, the abstract and one-sided construction of the axiom renders it insufficient to properly account for these problems.

The *Juche* axiom, to be sure, inverts the principle that the whole is greater than its parts. Logically and naturalistically, *man* is a part of *everything*. Another way to say this is *human beings* are a part of *nature*, or *human beings* are a particle of the *universe*, totality. A part is not greater than the whole. A particle does not “master” or “decide” the universe, but is encompassed within it, pervaded by it, and determined by its objective laws. Atoms, for example, are integral to the composition of material substances. In fact, atoms are so important in the structure of inorganic and organic matter that the simple addition of, say, an extra oxygen atom can turn water (H₂O) into hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂), which is poisonous. Atoms, all the while, are subject to underlying laws and the movement of subatomic particles such as electrons and quarks, which are themselves subject to laws on the subquantum level. Of course, among the fundamental distinctions between human beings and atoms is that humans are conscious agents, determined nevertheless by their material, historical, and social conditions of life, who can discover and learn objective natural laws and utilize them for productive or destructive ends, whereas atoms have no capacity for practical cognition. Practical cognition does not, however, put human beings in a position to conquer the laws of nature at any level, only to refine the application of constantly developing human knowledge. Human knowledge is never complete, but relative, an endless approximation of thought to object (Lenin 2007). By positing abstract *man* as the subject and as the *master of everything who decides everything*, the *Juche* axiom essentially attributes a Logos, main motivating principle, to the human. Logos is personified in anthropos. *Juche* is therefore not only an anthropocentric doctrine but more accurately described as an anthropologocentric

doctrine, whose central point of mediation to the universe is mental. That places it in the camp of idealism. In *Juche* ideology, human beings are mediated to nature through consciousness. Bypassing rigidified Soviet Stalinist Marxism-Leninism, upon which *Juche* is premised (Kim 1996, 2), it should be noted that the mentalism of North Korean *national subjectivism* contradicts the historical materialism of classical Marxism, which finds the crucial point of mediation or metabolism between human beings and nature to be in labor. Labor made the ape human, constitutes social being, and develops consciousness, speech, and language (Engels 2001; Lukács 1980). Historical materialism is described by its founder, Karl Marx, as follows:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (qtd. in Plekhanov 2007)

The premises of historical materialism articulate that the objective determines the subjective, and that social existence is the ultimate source of social consciousness. “The essence of scientific Marxism consists, then, in the realization that the real motor forces of history are independent of man’s (psychological) consciousness of them” (Lukács 1967a). These material and social relations are more complicated than the anthropologism of the *Juche* axiom, which privileges “man” to an extreme degree, making him the absolute measure of all things. Whereas *Juche* begins with a binary opposition of “man” to “everything” and mediates that opposition through decision-making consciousness, the historical materialist conception posits objectivity, nature, existence as primary and establishes several points of mediation that interact upon each other to produce social consciousness. That *process* can be illustrated accordingly:

Objectivity	Mediation	Subjectivity
Social Existence ⇒	Legal and Political Superstructure	⇒ Consciousness
	Economic Structure of Society	
	Social Relations of Production	
	Material Forces of Production	

Fig. 2. Mediation of objectivity and subjectivity in historical materialism.

Classical Marxism sees that “man has become the measure of all (societal) things” and that human beings are the “greatest of all productive forces” (Lukács 1967b; Trotsky 2007).[4] Men and women are a part of nature, the greatest part because they are the self-conscious aspect of nature, a self-conscious productive force; however, their true sphere of domination is in their historically determined forms of social organization, not nature. While Marxism postulates that “man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it” (Lenin 2007), this does not suggest that human beings are the artificer or dominator of nature. Rather, the meaning is restricted to the sense that people act on nature through practical cognition in an effort to satisfy their needs and that changes in material life have an objective quality. Compared to the empirically verifiable Marxist view that social being determines social consciousness, the *Juche* axiom, “Man is the master of everything and decides everything,” resembles a metaphysical and thus nonsensical first principle that must be accepted on faith.

Juche overstates the importance of social consciousness and its activating role to the extent that it renders the temporal, historico-genetic and content-related primacy of matter practically meaningless. The question remains to what degree *Juche* ever sought to attain any of the important goals of Marxism at all, and whether it ever really tried to establish [in the words of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*] the conditions for an “association in which the free development of everybody individually is a condition for the free development of everybody together.” (Göthel 1996, 19)

Constructed as it is on a subject-object binary opposition of an abstract “man” to an abstract “everything,” the *Juche* axiom, even standing on its own, reveals that the *Juche* ideology of North Korea is antithetical to and incompatible with historical materialism.

Kim Jong Il on *Juche* Ideology

One should permit Kim Jong Il to address the charges of idealism, metaphysics, and subjectivism in the *Juche* idea. The following is from his 1982 speech “On the *Juche* Idea” presented to social scientists and theoretical propagandists at the National Seminar of the *Juche* Idea commemorating the seventieth birthday of then-leader Kim Il Sung.

Man cannot, of course, live outside the world; he lives and conducts his activity in the world. Nature is the object of man’s labour and also is the material source of his life. Society is a community where people live and conduct activities. Natural environments and social conditions have a great effect on human activity. Whether natural environments are good or bad and, in particular, whether the political and economic systems of a society are progressive or reactionary—these factors may favourably

affect human endeavour to remake nature and develop society or limit and restrict that activity.

But man does not merely adapt himself to environments and conditions. By his independent, creative and conscious activity, man continuously transforms nature and society, changing as he desires what does not meet his needs, and replacing what is outdated and reactionary with what is new and progressive. This is man's endeavour and struggle to change and transform the world into one that serves man better.

The Juche idea established a man-centred outlook on the world by throwing a fresh light on the essential characteristics of man and his position and role in the world. It had already been known that the world consists of material and changes and develops as a result of the motion of material. The Juche idea gives a new world outlook by answering the question of who is the master that dominates nature and society and where is the force that transforms them. That the world is dominated and reshaped by man is a new viewpoint on the world in relation to man. (Kim 1982)

Kim Jong Il attempts to focus more squarely on the problem of subjective desire, that is, pragmatic voluntarism, in his 1986 speech to senior officials of the Workers' Party of Korea titled "On Some Problems of Education in the *Juche* Idea":

When we say that the Juche idea is a man-centred outlook on the world, some people think that it stresses only man's subjective desires, ignoring the objective world. This is a serious misunderstanding. We said that the world should be viewed with man at the centre. We have never said that we should view man alone.

Why, then, should we view the world with man at the centre? It is because man is the most developed material being, holds the position of master in the world, and plays the decisive role in the development of the world and in shaping his own destiny.

Man has a common basis with other living organisms in that he, too, is a living material being which came into existence in the long course of the evolution of nature. Nevertheless, there are qualitative differences in the levels of the development of man and other organisms. For this reason, there are fundamental differences between man's position and role in the world and those of other material beings.

Man, not nature, holds the position of master in the material world. Man is the only independent being in the material world. Animals can survive only by adapting themselves to nature. Therefore, they cannot be called masters of their own destiny. Animals are part of nature and their destiny is determined by the natural laws of change and development, whereas man is the powerful master of the world who, on the basis of a scientific understanding of these natural laws, transforms nature to meet his own needs and harnesses it in his service. Man is not a being which obeys the

natural laws of change and development and casts in his lot with nature; he is a social being who shapes his own destiny independently and creatively in accordance with the laws of social movement, the laws peculiar to human society. The greater man's creative role grows in transforming nature, the higher his position as the master of the world rises, and the better the material world surrounding him is changed to serve him. Since man is the only creative being that changes the world purposefully to meet his needs, he not only holds the position of master in the world, but plays the decisive role in transforming and developing the world. (Kim 1995, 2–3)

These tautologous passages, which are in line with the anthropocentric *Juche* axiom, confirm the truism that subjective idealism can affirm the existence of an objective and external material universe, or, at least, something independent of the perceiver that is received as sense data. That predisposition to the world, however, is a solipsistic mentalist one, not a materialistic one. The philosophical problem is that subjective idealism makes the subject or subjectivity, not matter and the material conditions of life, the starting point of analysis. That compromises and distorts its recognition of the objective world. Kim Jong Il's nonsensical notion that "Man, not nature, holds the position of master in the material world" is a gross confirmation of that distortion.[5] The subjectivist *Juche* doctrine defines the mediation of man/humans (subject) to everything/nature (object) via the decision-making capacity of "man," whose role as "master of everything" depends on three essential qualities: "The leader [Kim Il Sung] made it clear that man is a social being with Chajusong, creativity and consciousness," which, Kim Jong Il adds, are "social qualities" that "take shape and develop socially and historically" (Kim 1982). *Chaju* means "autonomy" or "independence" and *sŏng* is equivalent to "-ness," thus rendering the term theoretically comparable with the indeterminist conception of free will. The phrase "social being" (*sahoejŏk chonjae*) is not used in the sense of objective social existence, but as a basic equivalent to the concept of *zoon politikon*, political animal. That is seen in Kim Jong Il's respective definitions of independence (*chajusŏng*), creativity (*chajŏsong*), and consciousness (*ũshiksŏng*).

Chajusong is an attribute of social man who is desirous of living and developing in an independent way as master of the world and his own destiny. On the strength of this quality, man throws off the fetters of nature, opposes social subjugation of all forms and puts everything at his own service.

Chajusong is the life and soul of man, the social being. When Chajusong is referred to as man's life and soul, it means social and political integrity. Man has a physical life and also social and political integrity. The physical life is what keeps a man alive as biological organism; social and political integrity is what keeps him alive as social being. Man is a being with creativity, that is, a creative social being.

Creativity is an attribute of social man who transforms the world and shapes his destiny purposefully and consciously. By virtue of his creativity, man transforms nature and society to be more useful and beneficial to him by changing the old and creating the new.

Creativity, like Chajusong, constitutes an essential quality of man, the social being. Chajusong finds expression mainly in man's position as master of the world; creativity is expressed mainly in man's role as transformer of the world.

Man is a being with consciousness, that is, a conscious social being. Consciousness is an attribute of social man, which determines all his endeavours to understand and reshape the world and himself. Because he has consciousness man understands the world and the laws of its motion and development, reshapes and advances nature and society as he desires.

Consciousness guarantees the Chajusong and creativity of man, the social being, and ensures his purposeful cognition and practice. Chajusong, creativity and consciousness, after all, are what enables man to be superior to any other being and to be the most powerful being in the world, to approach the world not fatalistically but revolutionary, not passively but actively and to reshape the world not blindly but purposefully and consciously. Man, the social being, who has Chajusong, creativity and consciousness, is precisely the only dominator and remaker of the world. (Kim 1982)

In spite of the claim that *Juche man* is materially, socially, and historically determined, Kim Jong Il has declared that "man" does not obey the natural laws of change and development and cast "his" lot with nature, that the fatal flaw of Marxism is that it identifies "the process of social development with that of natural history," and that *Juche* ideology must be accepted as an "absolute truth" (Kim 1995, 3; Kim 1996, 6).

Firstly, classical Marxism does not equate the laws of social development with the laws of nature. Both sets of laws operate on different quantitative levels. There is, of course, to use Lukács' phrase, an "umbilical cord between man and nature." Frederick Engels observes in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886) that nature and society are both a process of historical development, and that the general laws of motion as found in nature also assert themselves in human history. Yet an important distinction exists:

In one point, however, the history of the development of society proves to be essentially different from that of nature. In nature—in so far as we ignore man's reaction upon nature—there are only blind, unconscious agencies acting upon one another, out of whose interplay the general law comes into operation. Nothing of all that happens—whether in the innumerable apparent accidents observable upon the surface, or in the ultimate results which confirm the regularity inherent in these accidents—happens as a consciously desired aim. In the history of

society, on the contrary, the actors are all endowed with consciousness, are men acting with deliberation or passion, working towards definite goals; nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended aim. But this distinction, important as it is for historical investigation, particularly of single epochs and events, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by inner general laws. For here, also, on the whole, in spite of the consciously desired aims of all individuals, accident apparently reigns on the surface. That which is willed happens but rarely; in the majority of instances the numerous desired ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends themselves are from the outset incapable of realization, or the means of attaining them are insufficient. Thus the conflicts of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history produce a state of affairs entirely analogous to that prevailing in the realm of unconscious nature. The ends of the actions are intended, but the results which actually follow from these actions are not intended; or when they do seem to correspond to the end intended, they ultimately have consequences quite other than those intended. Historical events thus appear on the whole to be likewise governed by chance. But where on the surface accident holds sway, there actually it is always governed by inner, hidden laws, and it is only a matter of discovering these laws. (Engels 1994b)

There is a distinctive law of development of nature, a law of development of human history, and a special law of motion that governs society. This is summarized in Engels' 1883 speech at the grave of Marx:

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: *the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.*; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.

But that is not all. Marx also discovered the special law of motion governing the present-day capitalist mode of production, and the bourgeois society that this mode of production has created. The discovery of surplus value suddenly threw light on the problem, in trying to solve which all previous investigations, of both bourgeois economists and socialist critics, had been groping in the dark. (Engels 1993; emphasis added)

Secondly, classical Marxism, unlike *Juche*, does not hold itself as “absolute truth.” In Marxist philosophy, all is transitory and constantly changing: nature, society, and ideology. Nothing is absolute, final, or sacred. Everything is relative (Engels 1994a; 2000). Marxists are relativists, but theirs is a relative relativism not an absolute relativism (Voronsky 1998, 107). Receptive to modern scientific research, a position that entails the possibility of having to dismiss all of Marx’s theses if they are proved false, “[o]rthodox Marxism, then, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*” (Lukács 1967c; italics in original). *Juche* subjectivism, which regards itself as “absolute truth,” is not a philosophy or method, but a dogma, and cannot afford a self-critical perspective. The materialism it espouses is contradictorily and crudely postulated, and its essentially religious and irrationalist anthropocentrism diverges from modern scientific humanism.

Anthropocentrism, not Humanism

The man-centered character of *Juche* subjective idealism is not original nor is its anthropocentrism a case of humanism. The whole of Greek philosophy up to medieval scholasticism privileged abstract “man.” Stoicism, for instance, asserted his absolute independence (*autárkeia*), something Christianity converted into a fundamental vice and error. Nonetheless, in both “Stoic philosophy and Christian theology man was described as the end of the universe. Both doctrines are convinced that there is a general providence ruling over the world and destiny of man” (Cassirer 1953, 24, 30). Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism also placed “man” in the center and above all creatures, with heaven (*t’ien*) and earth (*ti*) being integral to his constitution. The Great Ultimate (*t’ai chi*) underlies all things, and because mind (*hsin*) is in direct relation to the Great Ultimate, mind is greater than nature (*tzu-jan*). Man in this scheme is the end of the cosmos, and the intellectually, morally, and spiritually self-cultivated Confucian gentleman (*chun tzu*), the exemplary man or the superior man, has independence. Not surprisingly, Confucianism has a religious and mystical dimension that incorporates Buddhism and Taoism (Kim 1977). The Confucian doctrine, which has certain resonances with the anthropocentrism of Stoic idealism, does not compose a scientific materialist philosophy. Confucianism is part of the historical and ideological substratum of *Juche* ideology, and there are certain conceptual inheritances. *Juche* anthropologism is teleological, links the religious notion of destiny (*unmyǒng*) to the notion of independence (*chajusǒng*), and conceives an abstract *Juche* “man” that is really an *autarkic man*. This serves to justify the North Korean state, which is based on the Stalinist program of national autarky, *socialism in one country*, also called “our-style socialism” (*urishik sahoejuǐ*), and encapsulated in three political principles introduced as a set by Kim Il Sung in 1965: “independence in politics” (*chaju*), “self-sustenance in the economy” (*charip*), and “self-defense in national defense” (*chawi*) (Kim 1968, 38). The essence of autarkic *Juche man* is not the ensemble of social relations, but a pure ideological essence. He is thus a *Volksgeist* that possesses no reality, a fantastical demiurge, a non-existent being who becomes the absolute measure, master, and decider of all things real, concrete, and changing. One may approximate his fictitious ideological movement as follows:

Man		Juche Idea		Our-Style Socialism		North Korea
Anthropologos, Volksgeist	⇒	National Subjectivism	⇒	National-Stalinist Program	⇒	National State

Fig. 3. Abstract man as anthropologos and *Volksgeist* of the North Korean state.

Despite the pre-critical and nonsensical character of *Juche*, certain academics who are non-specialists in philosophy have claimed that it is “a rationalist [i.e., rational] ideology that explicitly denies the existence of God and the idea of retribution in the afterlife” (Lankov 2006, 102); that it is an internationalist “farrago of Marxist and humanist banalities,” “a hodgepodge of Marxist and humanist truisms” (Myers 2006, 91, 109); that it is related to Renaissance philosophy as represented in Leonardo Da Vinci’s image of Vitruvian Man (Myers 2007); and that “it is highly similar to Hegelian Marxism, especially that of Georg Lukács” (Ryang 1997, 98). These claims are absurd. None of them is reflected in the phrase *Juche sasang* (national subjectivism) or in the binary opposition structure and mediating relations of the *Juche* axiom: “Man is the master of everything and decides everything.” Fortunately, at least one non-philosopher, political scientist Han S. Park, has underlined the “militant nationalism” of the doctrine and the religious character of “*Juche* as theology.” Since the 1980s, he points out, “*Juche* has been rapidly transformed into a religious doctrine or theology.” Moreover, “*Juche* theoreticians have also been deeply involved in studying the possible linkage between the ideology and Christian theology. One should not be surprised by the fact that *Juche* theoreticians have even advanced the ‘theology’ of an eternal life as well as the concept of a supernatural being or God of sorts” (Park 1996, 14, 15). Park has also attempted an application of the Husserlian phenomenological method to address this problem (Park 2002). The political scientist is touching on the transposition and personification of Logos in anthropos in North Korean *national subjectivism*. One can thus say that in *Juche* doctrine, God in heaven is transposed onto earth in “man” and creates and decides everything. That is, the existence of God is embodied in anthropological form: God is man and man is God. Yet the religious element of *Juche* should not be read in Christian terms per se, but as a case of appropriating theology in a certain way, as in Kim Il Sung’s slogan “The people are my God” and, as Stephen Linton points out, in Kim’s remark, “It’s OK for Koreans to believe in religion, so long as it is a Korean religion. It’s OK for Koreans to believe in God, just so long as it is a Korean God” (Linton 2002). These are cases of the non-humanistic and metaphysical “anthropocentric conceit” (Cooke 2003–2004).

On the point raised that *Juche* makes “man” the absolute measure of all things (i.e., radical relativism), it is instructive to read what Lukács has to say on the philosophical danger of overemphasizing the position of human beings in relation to the universe:

[I]f man is made the measure of all things, and if with the aid of that assumption all transcendence is to be eliminated without man himself

being measured against this criterion, without applying the same 'standard' to himself or—more exactly—without making man himself dialectical, then man himself is made into an absolute and he simply puts himself in the place of those transcendental forces he was supposed to explain, dissolve and systematically replace. At best, then, a dogmatic metaphysics is superseded by an equally dogmatic relativism.

This dogmatism arises because the failure to make man dialectical is complemented by an equal failure to make reality dialectical. Hence relativism moves within an essentially static world. As it cannot become conscious of the immobility of the world and the rigidity of its own standpoint it inevitably reverts to the dogmatic position of those thinkers who likewise offered to explain the world from premises they did not consciously acknowledge and which, therefore, they adopted uncritically. [. . .]

For, from the standpoint of both logic and method, the 'systematic location' of the absolute is to be found just where the apparent movement stops. The absolute is nothing but the fixation of thought, it is the projection into myth of the intellectual failure to understand reality concretely as a historical process. (Lukács 1967b)

These lines are a concentrated refutation of the *Juche* axiom and help distinguish anthropocentrism from humanism. Humanism denotes several things that are quite distinctive from anthropocentrism: not a magnified and teleological importance of human beings in the universe, but an emphasis that humans are part of nature; that humans are limited and finite; that humans cannot know things beyond practical cognition; and that human progress depends on art, science, reason, knowledge, and democracy, not dogma, faith, mysticism, religion, and dictatorship. Humanism, in short, is a naturalism and a rationalism. Nicolaus Copernicus in the sixteenth century was the first to shatter anthropocentrism with his heliocentric cosmology, de-centering the anthropos of Christian theology and ushering revolutions in the scientific and humanistic thought of the Renaissance. One consequence of that de-centering is seen in the philosophical skepticism of Michel de Montaigne, a French humanist and Christian who fought medieval scholasticism and the Church. His essay "An Apology for Raymond Sebond" (1576) reads thusly:

Let us then consider, for the moment, man alone [i.e., without God], without external help, armed solely with his own arms, and stripped of grace and divine knowledge that are his whole honor, his power, and the foundation of his being. Let us see what figure he cuts in this fine array. Let him make me understand, by the effort of his reasoning, on what foundations he has built these great advantages he thinks he has over other creatures.

Who has persuaded him that that marvelous motion of the celestial vault, the eternal light of those torches rolling so proudly overhead, the terrible movement of that infinite sea are established and continue for so many

centuries for his convenience and service? *Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as that this wretched and cowardly creature, who is not even master of himself, exposed to threats from all things, should call himself master and emperor of the universe when he lacks the power to understand its least part, let alone to command it?* And as for this privilege that he claims of being the only one in this great edifice who has the ability to recognize its beauty and its parts, the only one who can give thanks to the architect and keep accounts of the receipts and expenses of the world: who has granted him this privilege? Let him show his credentials for this fine and great charge. (Montaigne 2003, 12; emphasis added)

This passage, which epitomizes Montaigne's motto "What do I know?" (*Que sais-je?*), is notable not simply or exclusively for its criticism of human reason, but for its criticism of anthropocentrism, something Montaigne casts as presumptuous and vain:

Presumptuousness is our natural and original illness. The most ill-fated and feeble of all creatures is man, and at the same time the vainest. He feels and sees himself lodged here among the mud and dung of the world, attached and nailed to the worst, dearest, and most stagnant part of the universe, on the lowest floor of the house, farthest removed from the celestial vault, in the worst condition of the three kinds of animals [i.e., aerial, aquatic, and terrestrial]. *And there he goes, planting himself in imagination above the circle of the moon and bringing the heavens beneath his feet. It is through the vanity of that same imagination that he equates himself with God, that he attributes divine attributes to himself, picks himself out and separates himself from the crowd of other creatures, allots their share to the animals, his brothers and companions, and distributes among them such a portion of faculties and powers as he sees fit.* How does he know the internal movement and secrets of animals by the effort of his intelligence? By what comparison between them and us does he infer the stupidity he attributes to them? When I play with my cat, who knows if she is making more a pastime of me than I of her? (Montaigne 2003, 12; emphasis added)

What is significant in this sixteenth-century humanistic outlook is its recognition that humans are related to animals, that there is a natural kinship. Animals are the "brothers and companions" of human beings. The perspective is discordant with Christian anthropocentrism, which makes "man" the crown of creation: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (*Holy Bible*, Gen. 1:26). Besides Montaigne, one can also cite the anti-anthropocentric proposition of the eighteenth-century Scottish empiricist David Hume, who also writes in the tradition of philosophical skepticism: "But the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of

an oyster” (Hume 1996, 319). The historically, politically, and philosophically limited character of the earlier Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism notwithstanding, one still sees its fundamental rejection of anthropocentrism even in Frederick Engels’ essay “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man” (1876):

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest over nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us. Each of them, it is true, has in the first place the consequences on which we counted, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel out the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that they were laying the basis for the present devastated condition of these countries, by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture. When, on the southern slopes of the mountains, the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, with the effect that these would be able to pour still more furious flood torrents on the plains during the rainy seasons. Those who spread the potato in Europe were not aware that they were at the same time spreading the disease of scrofula. *Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood, and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other beings of being able to know and correctly apply its laws.* (Engels 2001; emphasis added)

The said examples recall so-called *Juche* farming methods in North Korea, such as deforestation for terrace farming, which made farmland susceptible to destructive floods from torrential rains in the mid-1990s, contributing to the North Korean Great Famine of 1996 to 1999. Resulting in an estimated 200,000 to 3.5 million deaths (Woo-Cumings 2002, 21), the famine had an economic basis in the national autarkic policies of the North Korean Stalinist state and, notably, was precipitated by the sharp reduction of Soviet and Chinese food subsidies, equipment, and crude oil in the early 1990s (Natsios 1999). These reductions and withdrawals were the consequence of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and China, something that was structurally predetermined by decades of *socialism in one country*. The *Juche* axiom, “Man is the master of everything and decides everything,” does not make logical and philosophical sense in face of the combination of real human subjective fallibility and the objective material forces that created the social catastrophe of the Great Famine. Nature and the productive forces revolted against the axiom.

Conclusion

The metaphysics of the national-Stalinist *Juche* idea with its overgrowth of ideology stand in irreconcilable contrast to humanism, materialism, and rationalism. By positing that “Man is the master of everything and decides everything” and that “Man, not nature, holds the position of master in the material world,” *Juche* mystifies real social relations and the human relation to nature, rendering a false perception of objective reality and attributing false powers to human beings with disastrous philosophical and social implications. Based upon a non-realistically postulated subject-object binary opposition of abstract “man” and abstract “everything” that is arbitrarily mediated by the role of “man” as master and decider of everything, Logos personified in anthropos, the *Juche* axiom fails to apprehend that the relation of social existence to consciousness is decisively mediated by the historically developed material productive forces, social relations of production, and economic structure of society, all of which condition attitudes, psychology, and social consciousness. Human beings do not comprise the center of material reality, nature, or the universe, even if they are the greatest of all the productive forces on account of being the self-conscious aspect of nature. Moreover, the objective laws of social life, history, and cognition are not reducible to the natural laws that govern the movement of atoms, planetary systems, and the universe. Still, the basis of the universe and life is matter, and human beings, as an inseparable part of nature and the universe remain subject to its general laws. Consequently, nature operates through the agency of human action, and it is through this action (social practice, labor) that human beings develop their self-awareness, social self-consciousness, and practical cognition. Combining anthropocentrism, idealism, irrationalism, nationalism, theology, and utopianism, the *Juche* axiom has no empirical or materialistic content. *Juche* subjective idealism is not an “original revolutionary philosophy.” It is not even a philosophy. The doctrine is a nonsensical conceptual mythology rooted in bureaucratic and undemocratic forms of thought, which are themselves underlain by a bureaucratic and undemocratic social structure.

Notes

1. Use of the term “nonsensical” follows philosophical precedent, for example, A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*. Ayer maintains that if a proposition is not true by definition and if it is not verifiable in principle, it is nonsensical, that is, literally meaningless. This paper is not, however, written in the tradition of logical positivism.

2. The issue of ethnic-racial pride is discussed in Alzo David-West, “Marxism, Stalinism, and the *Juche* Speech of 1955: On the Theoretical De-Stalinization of North Korea,” *Review of Korean Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2007): 127–152; 139.

3. Though North Korean sources translate *saram* in the *Juche* axiom as “man,” the word does not exclusively define a male person. *Saram* also has a generic definition meaning man/mankind, person/people, and human/human beings.

4. Reference to Lukács and Trotsky is not meant to suggest that their philosophical and political views are compatible. Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) is useful but not consistently Marxist, and Lukács resigned himself to Stalinism in 1929–1933.

5. The original phrase, “Multchil segye eso chuin ūi chiwi rul cha’jihanūn kōsūn chayōn i anira in-gan imnida” (Kim 1987, 3), may also be translated as “In the material world, the thing that occupies the position of master is not nature but human beings.”

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